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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1923  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1942  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2043  
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2010  
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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN'S INDEPENDENT MEDIA PROCEEDS WITH CAUTION AFTER ELECTION

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¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Tajikistan's independent media is breathing slightly easier after the presidential election. In a lunch hosted by EmbOffs March 1, eight independent journalists opened up about the media environment. Most admitted that although the government has relaxed pressure on independent media, they are wary of the new-found freedom and the government continues to harass some journalists. END SUMMARY:

¶2. (U) Independent journalists told EmbOffs that after the November 2006 presidential election, they have encountered less government pressure and have continued to push the boundaries by publishing articles critical of the government and government officials. The government now permits Mukhtor Boqizoda, an independent newspaper editor, to publish his paper Nerui Sukhan. Boqizoda was found guilty of stealing electricity in 2005 and given the unusual sentence of correctional labor, rather than a fine, as is customary for such "administrative" violations. Observers in the independent press feel the charge was a ruse to force Boqizoda to cease printing his paper.

RADIO FREE EUROPE, NOT FREE TO OPERATE

¶3. (SBU) Despite some media freedom concessions, the government still closely monitors the media. One example of ongoing government pressure surrounds the controversial new urban plan. In December 2006, Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty broadcast a story about Dushanbe's new urban plan which threatens to displace residents from the city center with minimal compensation. According to Embassy sources one of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's sources of information alleged corrupt parties are behind the urban planning. After the report, the mayor's office sent Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty a letter stating that the story was one-sided and portrayed the city government in a negative light. It demanded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty issue a public apology. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's source has since, in a written statement, denied ever making the comments to the correspondent. Some believe the mayor's office pressured the source into signing the statement. To date, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has not issued a public apology and the government has not pursued legal

action.

¶4. (SBU) Incidents such as the recent pressure on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty remind journalists that the government is watchful of their reporting. Journalists continue to exercise self-censorship. One journalist said that despite an overall improvement in government attitude, he would not bother to publish his once shut-down paper and risk the government's wrath.

#### NO DAILY PAPERS ON THE CORNER

¶5. (U) Access to news remains a problem in Tajikistan. The majority of towns and villages outside of the capital, receive a limited number of hours of electricity every day meaning that television and internet are rendered inaccessible most of the time. Tajikistan does not have a daily newspaper and without regular television or internet access, most have to rely on once-a-week newspapers published every Thursday. When asked why Tajikistan does not have a daily newspaper, the journalists offered many excuses for the absence of a daily newspaper, citing a lack of proper distribution channels as the main culprit. According to the journalists, it is very difficult to distribute newspapers to Tajikistan's more rural areas. Even within Dushanbe, there is no reliable distributor and often the companies pay children or old women to sell newspapers on a street corner. In the past, the government has shut down some corner news kiosks citing the possibility of terrorists using them to place bombs. In Kulyab, a district in southern Tajikistan of approximately 80,000 people, a single vendor sells 300 issues of papers brought from Dushanbe every week on a table in the main center. The independent journalists also point out that the existing publishing houses are under strict government control and would not be willing to print more than once a week. Some journalists argue that publishing a daily newspaper in Tajikistan is not financially sustainable.

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¶6. (SBU) The journalists expressed skepticism about a daily newspaper and some were not in favor of a daily newspaper proposed by Asia-Plus, one of the leading news agencies in Tajikistan. The journalists feared that Asia-Plus would then have a monopoly over news distribution and crush smaller independent newspapers such as theirs.

¶7. (U) COMMENT: The journalists' concerns about a powerful daily newspaper overshadowing smaller papers reflect both an underdeveloped professional ethic and lack of entrepreneurial spirit in Tajikistan. Donor organizations can support both large news agencies and smaller independent papers to foster a more diverse media. A strong daily newspaper, particularly one published in Tajik language, with a reliable and far-reaching distributor and appropriately positioned vendors, would increase access to information and open the door for future daily newspapers. END COMMENT.

JACOBSON